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# SHAKESPEARE'S VIOLENT WOMEN: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF LADY MACBETH

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## ABSTRACT

There are numerous examples in which the female characters in William Shakespeare's plays go against the era's gender norms and enact violence. I argue that Lady Macbeth is one of these violent women whose violence defies gender roles, but this violence also simultaneously upholds traditional patriarchal modes of power. Lady Macbeth uses violence that stems from her feminine excess to advance patrilineage and her position within Scotland. In trying to understand her violence, I make use of a feminist analysis of Lady Macbeth by Cristina León Alfar and historical interpretations of the gender norms of the era. Lady Macbeth's violence elucidates the dilemma of the prominence of Shakespeare's female characters. While she has a significant role in the actions of the play, she still maintains hierarchical systems of power that are predicated on women's subjection.

**KEYWORDS:** *Shakespeare; Feminism; Violence*



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# SHAKESPEARE'S VIOLENT WOMEN: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF LADY MACBETH

## INTRODUCTION

As Derek Cohen notes in *Shakespeare's Culture of Violence*, “though violence is constructed in the established laws and codes as anti-social, though the violent act is punishable by law and called cruel and unnatural, it is the very system that so condemns it that produces it and, occasionally, needs and depends on it” (Cohen, 1). Shakespeare’s plays often portray violence that is rewarded or condemned, depending on which system of power it serves and to what ends. This violence is typically rewarded if it is performed for the dominant system in power and harshly repressed if it is performed for the opposition. For example, in *Macbeth*, Macbeth’s brutality in service of Duncan’s reign is rewarded, and it is his propensity for violence that grants him the crown. However, it is also this inclination towards violence that dubs Macbeth’s reign as tyrannical.

This violence that is used to keep patriarchal systems in place is frequently used against women to exclude them from power. Violence in Shakespeare’s plays is then typically examined through a lens that further supports the notions of patriarchal dominion against women. As seen in *Othello* and *King Lear*, the violence perpetrated against Desdemona and Cordelia is used as punishment for their tainted female chastity and the refusal of “the subjugation of the female self to the male” (Cohen, 9). Violence, then, is used to perpetuate patriarchal systems of power and is wielded by those in patriarchal society who hold the most power, men. While violence committed by men against other men and women in Shakespeare’s works has been thoroughly analyzed, there remains little scholarship on the subject of violence committed by women. These women utilize violence to gain power in a patriarchal society that is dominated by violence. This violence, then, is a means to an end of gaining power and a way for them to further their goals of moving up within their hierarchical society.

The female character that exemplifies these characteristics and that I focus my study on is Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth*. She utilizes rhetorical violence, which I define as verbal harm consisting of insults, mockery, etc. Lady Macbeth uses violence that stems from her feminine excess to advance patrilineage and her position within Scotland. This feminine excess consists of her severe devotion to upholding her role as a wife, and the violence that stems from her feminine excess is gendered through its connection to her reproductive capacities.

## EARLY MODERN GENDER ROLES

Lady Macbeth’s unconventional adherence to early modern gender roles is not an anomaly given the fact that these roles were seen as natural for women in the time. Early modern gender roles for

women are pervasive in the literature of that era. Women’s gender roles in early modern England were informed by both religion and the burgeoning Scientific Revolution. Both Protestant and Catholic thinkers alike believed that while women were spiritually equal to men in the eyes of God, they were still subordinate to them. They also saw marriage as the “natural” vocation for women” (Wiesner, 62) and that the ideal wife was “obedient, silent, pious” (Wiesner, 24). The importance of Protestant and Catholic views on women cannot be understated, as most Europeans were required to attend church, and thus, it was impossible to avoid these views as they were espoused in sermons and manuals by the church (Wiesner, 23). Women who strayed from these expectations were regarded with suspicion.

While the Scientific Revolution challenged old ways of thinking at the time, it did not “challenge inherited ideas about women” from ancient times (Wiesner, 25). This was most predominant in medical theories about women’s bodies and reproduction. Aristotelian thinking at the time saw women as incomplete or deformed men. Moreover, they believed women’s weaknesses were due to the fact that their reproductive organs were located inside, as opposed to men’s who were located outside (Wiesner, 26). One of the predominant theories concerning women’s bodies was the role of the uterus in women’s dispositions, an idea that emerged from Plato. Often, women’s illnesses were attributed to the uterus, especially mental illness. When the uterus was not regularly engaged in sexual intercourse and reproduction, illness was thought to wander the body (Wiesner, 27). The belief of the influence of the uterus and women’s reproductive capacities over their behavior was very much prevalent in the early modern period and found its way into many of the works of literature at the time. This claimed significance that the reproductive functions have over women’s behavior will be seen in Lady Macbeth’s interpretation of her own body.

## LADY MACBETH

Lady Macbeth’s support to advance her husband’s position within Scotland is clear from her entrance into the play. She agrees with the witches’ premonition and emphasizes the great things he can achieve if he only had the cruelty to commit the acts to achieve them. While many scholars argue that Lady Macbeth defies the gender roles of the era, Cristina León Alfar argues that Lady Macbeth’s character actually parodies the ideal early modern wife (Alfar, 113). She specifically states that Lady Macbeth presents herself as “the image of himself [Macbeth] he seeks” and that Shakespeare does this in order “to put pressure on masculinist and violent structures of relations that depend on women’s abject confirmation for their unremitting self-perpetuation” (Alfar, 111). In doing so, Shakespeare calls into question the systems that necessitate women’s abjection. While Alfar’s argument resonates with my

own, I contend that although Lady Macbeth does portray a heightened version of the gender roles of the era, her actions are not meant to be a parody. Lady Macbeth fulfills her role of the dutiful wife to ensure that Macbeth attains his goals and her dedication to this role manifests itself as rhetorical violence. This violence stems from her feminine excess of fulfilling her role as a wife to extreme ends, and these extreme ends mean supporting her husband no matter the cost. She understands that violence is the only way to ensure movement within the sovereign sphere at the time.

Lady Macbeth's first lines in the play do not consist of her own words, but her husband's, which signals that her character's primary motivations are invested towards her husband. She is first seen reading from a letter that Macbeth has sent her. Once she has finished reading the letter, she immediately establishes that the witches' premonitions will come true but also expresses her worries. She states, "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised: yet do I fear they nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way:" (1.5.13-16). Through these lines, Lady Macbeth establishes an early connection between violence and attaining power. For Macbeth to achieve his goals, he cannot have too much "o' the milk of human kindness," a phrase that has negative connotations to the female reproductive system. Lady Macbeth continues her questioning of Macbeth's capacity for violence as she states that "thou wouldst be great; / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it:" (1.5.16-18). Through these lines, Lady Macbeth expands on the idea that Macbeth possesses ambition, but he needs cruelty to make these ambitions a reality; her following "unsex me here" speech demonstrates her willingness to exert cruelty on herself in order to aid him. Just as "human kindness" is considered to be a kind of milk, "cruel ambition" is also associated with the body as Lady Macbeth views it as an "illness." These images of kindness, ambition, and cruelty as having physical manifestations continue as Lady Macbeth declares, "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear; / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round," (1.5.23-26). The line "That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;" suggests that Lady Macbeth possesses a cruelty that Macbeth does not. As Amy Kenny notes in "The Thick Womb," the "spirits" that Lady Macbeth refers to in this speech are typically associated with paranormal spirits, but it is more likely that the spirits she refers to are the more commonly understood spirits of the period that are described as fine, physical substances that govern one's behavior, typically in a malevolent way (Kenny, 63). These spirits are what grant Lady Macbeth the cruelty that Macbeth needs to commit regicide. Lady Macbeth has located cruelty and kindness as traits that manifest themselves physically in the body, thus, providing context for her next famous speech.

Once Lady Macbeth learns of Macbeth's imminent arrival, she prepares by dispelling any weakness from her body, which she associates with the female reproductive system, through verbal demands not unlike the rhetorical violence she uses on Macbeth. Lady Macbeth calls attention to spirits again. She asks them, "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!" (1.5.38-41). She wishes to be free from the categories of gender, notably to be freed from the idea that women were the lesser sex because of their leaky bodies. Indeed, as Kenny notes regarding ideas surrounding menstruation in this period, women were seen as "inferior, docile beings without agency over their own bodily functions" (Kenny, 63). Following this transformation, she requests that her body be filled with cruelty, for it to serve as the physical manifestation of cruelty. For this to occur, however, she must be rid of the feminine sensibilities that she believes restricts this cruelty; the spirits must "Make thick my blood; / Stop up the access and passage to remorse, / That compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose," (1.5.41-44). Not only is her reproductive system adverse to cruelty, but it is also responsible for the remorse that might impede her goal of urging her husband's purpose. To support her husband's ascent to the crown, she must disown the aspects of her bodily functions that are associated with weakness. Lady Macbeth's desire to disown the "weaker" aspects of her body mimics the rhetorical violence that she utilizes with Macbeth. She uses rhetorical violence upon herself to be able to aid Macbeth with the cruelty he needs to achieve his goals. With these lines, Lady Macbeth is espousing the early modern idea that the female body is inherently lesser than the male body, it is not suitable for cruelty and, thus, needs to be unsexed in order for it to be effective. Lady Macbeth's willingness to alter her body demonstrates the lengths that she will go through to support her husband.

Lady Macbeth continues her association of the female reproductive body with weakness when she asks the spirits to also take the milk from her breasts, which invokes her earlier statement in which Macbeth has too much of the milk of human kindness. She wishes for the spirits to "Come to my woman's breasts, / And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers" (1.5.45-46). Just as menstrual blood is associated with women being leaky vessels, so is breast milk connected to an understanding of women possessing inherently excessive bodies (Kenny, 64). Lady Macbeth's dedication to her role as a wife is emphasized in these lines as she seeks to deny her duties as a mother to fulfill her duties as a wife, particularly the duty of supporting her husband by possessing enough cruelty in order to encourage him to commit regicide. Her request for her milk to be replaced with gall demonstrates a connection between female reproductive functions and weakness. In this speech, Lady Macbeth tries to disown any aspect of her excessively leaky feminine body as it is not conducive to violence. Once her body is

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de-sexed, she can utilize rhetorical violence and play the role of the supportive wife to encourage Macbeth to commit violence.

Lady Macbeth pivots from playing the role of a supportive wife in the conventional way of complimenting him, to using her support as a means of insulting Macbeth and emasculating him. Lady Macbeth begins by insulting Macbeth as she questions his reluctance when she states, "Wouldst thou have that / Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life, / And live a coward in thine own esteem / Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'" (1.7.41-44). Lady Macbeth begins her insults by turning his potential lost ambitions on himself and does so by reminding him that he'd be an "a coward in thine own esteem" if he does not complete the deed. She reminds him that he himself deemed the crown as "the ornament of life," and refuses to let him back down from his plans. Lady Macbeth continues her questioning of his initial dedication to his plan after he states "Prithce peace: / I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.45-47). Macbeth demonstrates his insecurities with his masculinity as he feels the need to immediately demonstrate that he is the most masculine of all. Lady Macbeth's responds by encouraging him to be this man "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And, to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1.7.49-51). Lady Macbeth eggs Macbeth on by appealing to his precarious masculinity which she has just questioned, as she has an innate understanding that masculinity and violence dominates the culture of medieval Scotland, a fact that Alfar has noted in her work (Alfar, 121-122). It is Macbeth's unstable sense of masculinity that allows him to be manipulated by Lady Macbeth so readily, and she uses the feminine role of supporting her husband to remind him of his masculine aspirations. Thus, Lady Macbeth's feminine excess of rigidly upholding her role as the supporting wife is demonstrated through her use of rhetorical violence.

In order to encourage Macbeth to commit regicide, Lady Macbeth sets up a hypothetical situation in which her depravity is connected to female reproductive capabilities. Lady Macbeth continues her encouragement of Macbeth's regicide with the infamous lines:

*I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this. (1.7.54-59)*

Lady Macbeth presents a fantastical situation in which she is a mother and a dutiful one at that. She nurses the child herself and understands "How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me." In this hypothetical situation, Lady Macbeth is an ideal mother who

cares for her child and demonstrates the maternal warmth that is expected of her; however, things quickly turn for the worse. Lady Macbeth swears that she "would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums / And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you." Lady Macbeth's hypothetical maternal warmth is replaced by the ultimate maternal cruelty: infanticide. Her attempts to encourage Macbeth to commit the deed result from her playing into the role of the extremely supportive wife, which, as Kenny states "rather than destroying her femininity, this fantasy solidifies her unwavering allegiance to Macbeth, as she yearns to be understood solely as a wife, not a mother...She uses rhetorical infanticide to externalize her inner passions to the audience" (Kenny, 60). This hypothetical situation is a continuation of Lady Macbeth's role as a good wife, but it is a role that requires her to relinquish any maternal instincts, as was demonstrated when she said "take my milk for gall" (1.5.46). The imaginary violence that she conjures up demonstrates that Lady Macbeth understands that violence is what garners someone's power in Scotland, and she utilizes it in this scene in order to demonstrate to Macbeth the extremes that she would go to if necessary. However, Lady Macbeth is incapable of physical violence herself as demonstrated by Act 2, Scene 2, in which she states "I laid their daggers ready; / He could not miss 'em. Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.11-13). Lady Macbeth can only utilize rhetorical violence to inspire her husband to commit murder, as Alfar notes, "the law of the Father, in fact, precluding her from the power to act, for action is not her role; rather she must only facilitate her husband's acts" (Alfar, 127). Lady Macbeth resists gender roles insofar as insulting her husband, emasculating him, and using hypothetical violence, however, this is also to inspire him to reach the position they feel he deserves; but she does not stray so far as to commit murder herself. This hypothetical violence is used primarily to demonstrate the lengths that she will go to in order to inspire her husband: she would even imagine the violence that is seen as unimaginable for women in order to remind of his purpose.

## CONCLUSION

As Lady Macbeth utilizes rhetorical violence to push Macbeth to regicide, she relies on an inherently masculine form of gaining power to advance her husband's position. She does not advocate for patriarchy or for her own power when is not connected to any man but instead, exerts her efforts to uphold patriarchy. Lady Macbeth advocates for the ascension of her closest male relation to the crown, thus, fulfilling an extreme version of her role as a wife. Lady Macbeth relies on rhetoric to defy gender roles, as her emasculation of her husband goes against the early modern ideal of women as silent and meek. Her violence, however, simultaneously goes against the early modern notion of women as silent and

meeke but supports the rule of patrilineage, which fundamentally excludes women from holding power. Lady Macbeth's violence elucidates the dilemma of the prominence of Shakespeare's female characters: while she has a significant role in the actions of the play, she still maintains hierarchical systems of power that are predicated on her subjection.

What makes this topic worthy of further study is that Lady Macbeth is not an anomaly in Shakespeare's corpus. Queen Margaret in *King Henry VI, Part 3*, Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*, and Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* are characters that also exhibit violence and are ideal in continuing the study of Shakespeare's violent women. It is important to note that one thing these characters have in common is they are all in positions of power within the hierarchical society that they live in. A topic that begs further inquiry is a deeper analysis of the links between power, gender, and violence.

While the topic of violence and women in Shakespeare has been discussed as it relates to violence perpetuated by male characters against female characters, more critical discussion needs to focus on violence perpetuated by women in service of patriarchal systems of power. Returning to Derek Cohen, "Elizabethans saw the state as no less patriarchal for being embodied as a female [by Queen Elizabeth I]" (Cohen, 5). Thus, the task remains to further study how Shakespeare's female characters help uphold patriarchal power and the intricacies of power and violence. As women in positions of power become more prevalent, the question remains of who exactly these women are helping, and whether their leadership roles really challenge any of the patriarchal systems of power that remain in place. Examining Shakespeare's violent women can be an avenue for generating these discussions.

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